

# Drive On to Improve Evaluation Systems for Teachers

By Bess Keller  
Washington

The profile of teacher evaluation—in many school districts almost a pro forma exercise—is getting a boost.

A new report will warn that schools risk stalling the campaign to raise teacher quality if they do not take evaluation seriously. A panel discussion linked to the report last week echoed that conclusion. And the American Federation of Teachers recently set up a task force to promote a widely respected but little-used teacher-evaluation program pioneered by its Toledo, Ohio, affiliate.

"The troubled state of teacher evaluation is a glaring, and largely ignored, problem in public education," argued Thomas Toch,

a co-director of the think tank Education Sector, introducing last week's discussion of evaluation. "It's a lever of teacher and school improvement that's being squandered."

Mr. Toch is the author, along with Robert Rothman, of the report on the subject due out later this month.

The panel drew more than 125 education leaders and advocates here to the National Press Club.

## 'Meaningless' Exercises

Mr. Toch and the panelists decried the single classroom visit made by school administrators, checklist in hand, that too often constitutes teacher evaluation today. Because teachers are overwhelmingly paid on the basis of their years of experience and edu-

cation, and rarely encounter any consequences from the evaluations, the evaluations have largely deteriorated into, in Mr. Toch's words, "superficial, capricious, and often meaningless" exercises.

Raymond Pechione, who designed the nation's first performance-based teacher-licensure system when he was in Connecticut and now directs the Performance Assessment of California Teachers program, acknowledged the "dismal" state of teacher evaluation. He said licensing systems such as the ones he has worked on took teacher performance seriously but were aimed at ensuring teacher competence, and less at building teacher capacity.

"Our generation tried to separate those functions," he said. "I think the next generation will try

to bring those functions together."

The two teachers on the panel said an evaluation system geared to helping teachers improve—and not just weeding them out or punishing them—was primary to winning teacher support.

"If the evaluation is of assistance to teachers, geared to helping teachers improve, it's valued," said Marcia Reback, the president of the Rhode Island Federation of Teachers and Health Professionals, who is chairing the AFT's task force promoting the Toledo evaluation program, which focuses on beginning teachers. "If it's punitive, it's frightening."

Kaiulani Ivory, a 4th grade math and science teacher at the D.C. Preparatory Academy, a charter school in Washington that uses the Teacher Advancement Program, said the most important element of the program for teachers is its professional development. TAP combines new roles for teachers, accountability for student learning, and evaluations linked to both pay and professional development.

"It's not just evaluation with nothing gained from it," Ms. Ivory said. "There's a coaching piece."

TAP and Toledo's Peer Assistance and Review program are among the six "comprehensive" evaluation efforts Mr. Toch and Mr. Rothman examine in their report.

## Role of Test Scores

The panelists agreed that evaluations should be centered on teachers' classroom performance and student learning, which would open the way to compensation systems more closely linked to effectiveness than the vast majority of those now in place. Years on the job and college credits determine teacher pay in most districts, and except for the first few years of teaching, experience and education are at best uncertainly linked to teachers' ability to induce student learning.

Still, views diverged over the roots of the resistance to evaluations and to the relative role that should be played by student test scores in evaluating teachers.

Christopher Cerf, the deputy chancellor of the New York City schools, said teachers' "deep antipathy" to "meaningful" evaluations springs from a public school culture that allows credentials and tenure to stand in for classroom effectiveness. He posited a "chasm" between some union leaders' efforts to push a teacher-quality agenda and the life of most schools.

"I'm unapologetic that test scores must be a central component of evaluation," Mr. Cerf



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added. He said that whatever the flaws of tests, the scores of children in, say, 4th grade tend to predict the likelihood they will land in jail, be healthy or not, and reach a particular level of lifetime earnings, among other outcomes.

But others pointed to problems in using test scores that must be overcome: the fact that they generally measure low-level skills and that half of classroom teachers don't teach tested subjects.

Even with lack of agreement on student test scores in teacher evaluation, the pan-

elists generally endorsed a "multiple measures" approach. Mr. Toch said his research had turned up several features an evaluation system should have. They include a view of what good teaching is, captured in standards and descriptions; reliance on several measures of performance, some gauged by different evaluators over time; and ties to teaching improvement.

Mr. Toch said the battle over test scores may ease if evidence continues to accumulate that the kind of comprehensive observation and investigation of teacher performance in the classroom that he proposes correlates with teachers' ability to raise test scores.

Several experts said that peer review should be a pillar of evaluation, in part because there is too much work for administrators to do well and in part because it promotes teacher buy-in. Yet whoever does the work, the experts agreed, it is expensive to do well, and school districts have been reluctant to shift the estimated \$14 billion a year they spend on professional development into the process. Nor have most teachers' unions made evaluation a spending priority.

## Tool for Change

Education scholars who did not attend last week's meeting also welcomed the spotlight on teacher evaluation.

Thomas J. Kane, an economist at Harvard University's graduate school of education who has looked at the relationship between principals' observations of teacher effectiveness and teacher effectiveness as measured by student test-score gains, said it was high time districts turned their attention to evaluation, which he characterized as "their most potent tool" for improving teacher quality.

And he urged that information on teachers' capacity to raise student test scores be used to improve the instruments that assess teachers' classroom behavior.

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